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title WHAT WE LIVED ON
Novel

original title WOVON WIR LEBTEN
Roman

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English sample translation

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Part I, Chapter 8

‘It’s funny, really,’ says Micha.

‘What’s funny?’

We’re lying on our stomachs on the floor of his room, his comic-book collection strewn around us, showing each other the bits we like best. It’s the first day of the summer holidays, and we still haven’t decided what we’re going to do with it.

‘It’s funny that you didn’t have a best friend – until I came along, I mean.’

‘That’s true,’ I said hesitantly. On the page in front of me, Spiderman is climbing the wall of some tower block upside down.

Should I tell Micha the truth? That it’s just good timing, and that I still can’t quite believe it myself? After all, it’s only a few weeks since Mum suddenly made up her mind to ‘pull herself together’ and keep her hands off Whiskey & Co. Since then she’s thrown herself into housework: cleaning, vacuuming, doing the shopping, washing the curtains and replacing the pots and pans I scratched up during my experiments with cooking. That’s the only reason I had time to show Micha around the neighbourhood after school: the football ground, the old zoo, the swimming pool. If I hadn’t, somebody else would. It’s just that simple – I know from bitter experience. I can only hope this phase of Mum’s lasts as long as possible.

‘Sometimes you just have to wait for the right person to show up,’ I say – and immediately bite my tongue, having inadvertently made it sound like a marriage proposal.

But my answer seems to have done the trick, and Micha blushes happily. ‘So what are we up to today, then?’

I think it over. Make myself say the words. ‘Let’s get the bikes. I’ve got something to show you – something you’ve never seen before.’

It’s a test I’ve been wanting to give him for a while, and now the time has come. I’m as good as certain Micha will pass.

‘Let’s do it!’

If not, it would be a shame. But I don’t want to think that far ahead.

We cycle towards the town hall and then into the woods, Micha on his virtually new Kettler with its five-speed gear box and me on my ancient pushbike with its three gears and embarrassing back-pedal brake.

You can hear the motorway from far away, a distant, even buzz that sounds like television interference and gets louder and louder until you reach the bridge. The bridge is narrow, intended only for pedestrians and cyclists. The incline looks easier to manage than it actually is, but neither of us shows the slightest sign of getting off and pushing.

Reaching the middle, I stop short. ‘Here!’

‘Here? What are you talking about? What’s here?’ Micha yells above the traffic.

It’s a good question. Nothing is here, obviously – just us, and the motorway beneath. I’ve rarely seen anyone cross the bridge, and when I have, the walkers or cyclists are always in a hurry to get back to the stillness of the woods.

I lean my bike against the railing. ‘Close your eyes! And count to twenty out loud. Don’t cheat!’

By the time he’s finished, I’m standing with my back to him on the *other* side of the railing, on the very narrow concrete ledge directly above the six-lane road. I’m holding on tightly to the railing, of course, but I’m also tipping my whole body forward, squeezing my eyelids shut, listening only to the regular hum below me and savouring the keen sense of danger. I feel it, *my* danger – it’s always here, and it’s for me alone. It waits for me. Next time, who knows whether I’ll have the guts? Maybe I’ll come back as the coward’s version of myself, conformist, common, well-behaved like all the boring people. This is *my* test. I’m testing myself. I know lots of kids who are brave, interesting and full of life, but hardly any grown-ups. It’s like they take something away from you once you reach a certain age. I’ve got no idea what it is. Courage? Speed? Boldness? – that isn’t quite it. But it’s why I keep coming back, at least once a month.

‘Shit!’

The unexpected shout makes me jump. For a moment I forgot I wasn’t alone.

‘Hey, man, be careful!’ Micha says behind me. He sounds impressed. ‘That’s pretty fucking dangerous.’

He doesn’t know how right he is: a moment ago the shock nearly made me let go. I decide I’ve had enough, and clamber back.

‘Your turn. Go on.’

He hesitates.

‘Or are you scared of heights?’ I would have accepted that.

‘No, I’m not ...’

I can see he’s hesitating, weighing up the situation before he makes a decision. It’s in his nature that he always wants to take a position on things – for himself, not for me or for anybody else. I give him time. He steps up to the railing, looks down, says nothing, just bounces loosely at the knees and scrambles adroitly onto the ledge.

For a few breaths he stays close to the iron bars, then he slants forwards. Like a ski jumper.

Like a bird taking flight.

Like someone with a purpose.

Infinite possibility opening up before him.

With a feeling for *living*.

Does he understand what I understand? That when you’re hanging up there, feeling it more intensely than ever before – how wonderful it is, life – not because of but despite it all?

The real test is whether or not he gets it. At least *part* of it. What if his arms just hurt and he’s glad to get the test of courage behind him?

I hold my breath. He’s staying there a long time, much longer than he has to. That’s a good sign.

‘I’m coming to you!’ I shout. And a moment later we’re both hanging like two crooked triangles above the asphalt lanes, watching the roofs of cars flit past us.

Gingerly I turn my head towards Micha. He’s gazing down with a fascinated, perfectly calm face, his lips clamped shut, and we stand there for a few minutes, unafraid, deaf to everything except the buzzing traffic.

‘It’s crazy,’ he says once we’re back on solid ground. ‘Feels like you’re on the bridge of a ship.’

He looks back down, spellbound, at the stream of sheet metal rushing uninterrupted across the asphalt beneath the bridge. ‘You get this feeling of freedom, you know?’

‘My dad once said it stinks on bridges like these, but I can’t smell anything.’

He sniffs. ‘Nor can I.’

‘It’s like you’re suddenly at the edge of another world,’ I say.

He nods enthusiastically. ‘Yeah, that’s exactly it! If you jump, you’ll land in the future!’

‘And in the future our Earth is in ruins. It won’t be called the Earth anymore, it’ll be the Asphalt Planet. And there won’t be any people, just machines!’

‘The world as we know it will perish on 11 August! A solar eclipse will trigger the catastrophe! Just as Nostradamus foretold!’

Of course, the solar eclipse! Can’t believe I didn’t think of it myself! I pick up on the idea enthusiastically: ‘There’ll be a nuclear catastrophe, and satellites will rain from the sky!’

‘Paris will be laid waste by the impact of Russia’s MIR space station!’

‘The Asphalt Planet of the future will be ruled by machines! By robots and androids! Only they are immune to the deadly radiation!’ I exclaim in a rush of inspiration.

‘But we’re still alive,’ Micha corrects me. ‘You and me and a few other people survived in a bunker. We want to fight back, but there’s not enough of us. So we try to make contact with other solar systems where there are human settlements!’ His voice changes.

‘But not with the one where my father lives,’ I yell back.

‘Not all human settlements are automatically good! That makes things more complicated – we’re faced with a virtually impossible task!’

We grin at each other. He’s got a bit more insight into my home life now, just as I do into his.

We play the scenario through again until the Asphalt Planet is saved, we’re growing plants and the first few animals start to appear. Then we grab our bikes and push them down to the other side of the bridge, where we can chat more easily. The tension melts away. I’m glad he understood.

‘You were right, it’s really fucking dangerous,’ I say after we’ve been trudging side by side in pleasant silence for a while, ‘but it’s the kind of danger you enter voluntarily, so you can overcome fear. It’s training.’

‘And your reward is vertigo: the *good* kind, not the bad kind!’ says Micha. ‘Hardly anybody else can tell the difference. I think that’s the most dangerous thing I’ve ever done in my life. What about you?’

I consider the question. ‘Yeah, I think so.’

I don’t realise yet how quickly that will change.

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Part II, Chapter 12

‘She’s in the studio,’ says the nurse coming down the hallway as she sees me knocking on Stella’s door. It’s not the usual one – ‘Sister Frauke’, according to her name badge – but she’s just as friendly as her colleague was last week. ‘Why don’t you come and see her?’ She shows me the way to another part of the building.

I don’t know what I was expecting – occupational therapy like the kind we have, a bunch of people making posters together or gluing collages, maybe something like that. But this is a proper studio with big windows, and Stella is alone. She’s standing in front of an easel, and jumps when I say hello.

‘I’m *always* giving you a fright!’

‘Don’t worry, I’m just the nervous type. Hang on, I’ll open the window. After a while you don’t smell the paint anymore ...’ She laughs, wipes her hands on her splotchy green apron and goes to the window. Her hair is pinned up in a soft bun; a few long strands have come loose and are stuck to the flecks of paint on her chest.

I look at the picture on the easel. There’s an oily sheen to the fresh paint. It’s a bird – at least, part of one, flying into the image from the upper right-hand corner. Lots of green and blue, some light grey and a bit of red.

‘Is that oil paint? Nice ...’

‘Take a look around.’ She goes over to the sink and cleans her hands.

The other paintings are busier. Cheerful. Street scenes, children, animals. Nice ones: dogs, cats, parrots, even a horse. En masse they look somehow overdone, their merriment unreal, almost a parody. I take a closer look at the horse, which is standing on a street in the sunlight. It doesn’t cast a shadow.

‘Yeah, I’ve always painted. It’s a hobby of mine. I’m wondering whether I should put together a portfolio.’

‘A portfolio?’

‘Yeah. So I can apply to art school. You’ve got to do something specific. Have a style, I don’t know.’

‘You have a style. All those colours, and – and the animals don’t have shadows ...’

‘Don’t have – shadows? You mean metaphorically?’

‘No, I just mean shadows. If a horse is standing in the sun, look, it should be here ...’

At once Stella becomes thoughtful. ‘Hm. That’s a point. Ugh, I don’t know. I’m sure you’re right ...’

‘That one’s great.’ To distract her, I indicate a painting no larger than a school notebook. It’s a picture of a house so translucent you can see the trees and fields behind it – they’re very colourfully rendered too, but only in shades of green and yellow. As if by magic, she’s captured the atmosphere the building used to have for me: it feels like a scene from the future.

‘It looks a bit like your aunt’s house. Does she still live there?’

She shakes her head. She’s in a care home. But her house wasn’t *totally* made of glass. It just seemed like that when you were a kid. It’s so funny – everybody says that!’

‘It *was* made of glass,’ I contradict her. ‘And that’s exactly why it had that cube-like structure in the middle. It was weird.’

‘I had my hiding places.’

Stella suddenly seems upset. During the conversation she’s taken off her apron. In her black, baggy clothes she’s as thin as a lath. Nervously, she pulls her extra-long sleeves down over her hands, trying to show as little skin as possible. I’m pretty sure the glass house is to blame for why she hates being looked at so much. Being another body exposed and vulnerable in space. ‘Maybe that’s why you want to disappear. Because you grew up in that glass house.’

‘Disappear?’

‘Being so thin, I mean.’

She turns away. ‘I can’t stand it when people who barely know me tell me what I’m feeling.’

I bite my lip. ‘I’m sorry. Must be all those therapy sessions – makes you start thinking that way. I just want to understand you.’

‘I’d rather you told me what’s wrong with the paintings – apart from the horse’s shadow. The shrinks here like them because they’re so life-affirming. Life-affirming! That’s not enough. That’s bloody well not enough. A *carrot* can be life-affirming!’

I think for a moment. ‘Your real style might be a bit darker. Look at yourself. And you could give the people a bit more space. Like that guy who always painted empty bars and petrol stations ...’

‘Hopper.’ She frowned. ‘You like Hopper?’

I shrug and admit I’m clueless about art – it was just an idea. ‘Why don’t you paint yourself? In black. Or your parents ...’

She gives an irritated laugh and changes the subject. ‘You could have visited me sooner, you know.’

‘I was busy.’

‘*Busy*?’ She raises an eyebrow. ‘With what?’

‘This and that.’

‘Well well well! Alright, let’s go for a little walk. Maybe I can wrinkle it out of you.’

‘You can. But later – it’s not official yet.’

‘Ooh, official, eh? Listen to Mister Secretive!’

She pulls on a coat. Slowly I wonder what she wears when it gets properly cold. The coat flutters around her like a cape, and I think, Minnie Mouse playing Count Dracula, and I get the urge to put my arm around her shoulders.

We turn onto the path directly behind the clinic. I wonder how many kilometres I’ve already walked in these woods. I never get bored. The light falling through the trees is almost translucent, the fragments of sky between the tree-tops white and blue. My thoughts are light, each step I take cushioned gently by the soil. I try to match my pace with Stella’s, who’s moving very slowly again. No idea whether it’s deliberate or whether her body does it automatically to save energy. The wind rustles around us, the mild air connecting us to the trees, and all at once I find myself wondering what it would be like to kiss her again. Like our childhood kiss, her mouth fresh and pleasantly warm? Her scent interests me too. What would it be like to slip under the covers with her, nestle up to her warm, naked body? Would I be hard, or ...’

‘Marten, I’ve just had an idea. Can you weld something for me if I give you a sketch to work from?’

‘You want something *welded*?’

‘I’m not sure what, yet. An object. Just to keep my options open with art school. You can apply for sculpture as well, you know.’

‘Sure, but – don’t you have to make it yourself?’

She shook her head. ‘Only once you’re on the shortlist. Then you get given materials and you have to create something in front of the examiners. Mostly out of wood or clay. But if I submit something in steel that’s really awesome ... it’s about originality. Marten, I think this is a brilliant idea! I still have two god-awful months left here ...’

Her enthusiasm makes me feel awkward. I glance down at my phone. ‘Let’s turn back – I’ve got group.’

‘Oh, of course. Man, I’m so pleased about this! I’ll get started on a few designs. It’ll take a while, but ...’

‘No problem. Take your time.’

After the visit to Stella my room seems shabby and small. The bed takes up nearly half the space, a wobbly thing with a wooden headboard and a horribly soft mattress. The plushy yellow bedspread smells of dead great-grandparents, although I’ve washed it several times over. I can’t decide whether I like Stella getting me involved in her art or whether I feel exploited.

I look for the others and find them in the TV room, watching *The Omen*. We’ve just reached the bit where the wife of the US ambassador gives birth to a stillborn baby son and they swap him for a different child when one of the nurses shows up. ‘Horror films are banned. Either watch something else or I’m locking up the room. Who’s got the remote?’

As soon as he’s gone we turn the channel back over, of course, although we know he’ll come back fifteen minutes later to check on us. We make Uwe keep a lookout at the door, but after two false alarms most of us are fed up of the constant switching back and forth and drift outside to smoke.

‘Another classic evening at the crazyhouse,’ says Peter.

We’re standing a little apart from the others, almost at the edge of the woods.

‘Stella’s painting!’ I say.

‘Yeah, well, nice young ladies like her have to occupy their time with something.’

‘You knew?’

‘Anne told me, yes. She – well, she’s not happy about it.’

‘I thought maybe when you have a restaurant again and you can exhibit that Thorsten Reibach guy, or whatever his name is, then you could do the same for ...’

‘Tobias Rehberger. Man, you’re really stuck on her, aren’t you? Look, I’m not saying no, but I have to get the hardware up and running before I can think about all that extra stuff. This is a business we’re talking about, not a subsidised kindergarten. Actually, that reminds me: you’re not on board yet! Or have you finally changed your mind?’

I say nothing.

‘Okay, well at least you seem to be giving it some thought. That’s all I ask.’

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